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**For More Information Contact**

Charles Ford, Communications, (804) 864-7668

Joanne Wakeham, R.N., Ph.D., Director of Public Health Nursing, (804) 864-7017

**PUBLIC HEALTH NURSES SAFEGUARD THE HEALTH  
OF ALL VIRGINIANS, MAKING A DIFFERENCE EVERY DAY**

*National Nurses Week is May 6-12*

(RICHMOND, Va.) – Whether it's a natural disaster, an outbreak of tuberculosis, or a person in need of personal health care services, Virginia's public health nurses serve on the front lines. They provide an array of health care services that help promote the health of Virginia residents. Virginia Department of Health (VDH) nurses work with educators, doctors and other partners to inform, educate and empower people about health issues and mobilize community partnerships to identify and solve health problems.

Jessica Dawson, R.N., who works to improve the health of citizens in the Chesterfield Health District every day, was recently named VDH's Public Health Nurse of the Year. In the Chesterfield district, Dawson focuses on protecting the health of school students in the county. She monitors the health of school populations, identifies clusters of illnesses and initiates programs to reduce health threats. For example, she facilitated a 10-week smoking cessation program for high school students, a seven-week asthma education program and taught heart health and blood pressure to advanced biology students. She has implemented numerous health promotion activities related to pregnancy prevention, diabetes, pandemic flu, nutrition, breast cancer and alcohol prevention.

"Public health nurses like Jessica are really the backbone of our public health system," said VDH Director of Public Health Nursing Joanne Wakeham, R.N., Ph.D. "They are our eyes and ears in our schools and communities; they identify emerging health problems and initiate actions that help protect everyone's health."

The goal of public health is to prevent disease, illness or injury before it happens, improving the health of an entire population. To control the spread of contagious diseases, public health nurses work with and within communities to spot trends of symptoms in emergency rooms, and they interview patients and identify exposures. They promote healthy habits to prevent chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer. Public health nurses help families by assisting doctors in providing prenatal care, teaching parents how to keep their children safe and helping prevent and manage chronic disease.

Public health nurses are in high demand today. Many experienced nurses are expected to retire from VDH in the next few years and public health nursing is often overlooked as a career path. VDH offers several scholarships to help pay the cost of nursing school.

"Today's public health nurse must have the strength to care for communities in times of disaster, the compassion to provide quality health care to individuals in need and a commitment to support individual and community health improvement efforts," said Wakeham. "We need more nurses, both experienced nurses and recent graduates, to help ensure the health of future generations."

For more information about careers in public health nursing, visit [www.vdh.virginia.gov/nursing](http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/nursing).

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